

*Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.*

Psalm 4:1

Psalm 3 and 4 are closely linked lament psalms that express strong confidence in Yahweh. Psalm 3 is prayed in the morning as the psalmist arises to face the day confident in Yahweh's promise of deliverance. Psalm 4 is prayed in the evening as the psalmist goes off to sleep resting in Yahweh's peace. In the middle of a serious crisis, the people of God are led in morning and evening prayers. *Many* are predicting, "God will not deliver him" (Ps 3:1), and *many* are questioning, "Who will bring us prosperity?" (Ps 4:6). The psalmist responds to the menacing voice of the many by calling out to Yahweh: "I *call* out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain" (Ps 3:4); "Answer me when I *call* to you, my righteous God" (Ps 4:1). His theology reflects his confidence. Yahweh meets the challenge of the many from his holy mountain and his righteousness. Yahweh occupies the strategic high ground in both power and rightness. The Mighty God champions the rightness of David's cause.¹ Yahweh is the author of righteousness and "the vindicator of misjudged and persecuted righteousness."²

Psalm 3 and 4 share a similar tone of confidence and calmness. The situation may be dire but there is a resilient restfulness conveyed in the psalmist's expectation of deliverance and vindication. Finally, both psalms talk about a good night's sleep: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me" (Ps 3:5); "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Ps 4:8). Psalm 3 and 4 witness the daily prayer of a resilient saint who knows how to "pray continually" and rest in God's peace (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The psalm is a beautiful companion to the apostle Paul's spiritual direction to the church at Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

From a pastoral perspective both psalms express deep confidence in Yahweh and both encourage an attitude of willed passivity. Instead of reacting to the crisis in panic or frustration, David's recourse is to trust in Yahweh. He does not see victory coming as a result of his own well-executed strategic counter-moves. He is not plotting; he's praying. Of course David did act strategically when he fled Jerusalem immediately and when he planted Hushai his confidant inside Absalom's conspiracy, but all along he was looking to Yahweh to make all the big moves. David shows us the difference between passivity and willed passivity. He is not apathetic; he's

¹ Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 233.

² Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, vol.1: 112.

trusting. His intentionality is strategic: “I call out to the Lord. . . I lie down and sleep . . . I will not fear . . .” (Psalm 3:4-6). His insight is definite: “Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself.” His desire is certain: “Fill my heart with joy” (Ps 4:3, 7).

If the back story to these two psalms is Absalom’s rebellion, and I see no reason to doubt that it is, we see how David’s prayers impacted his response to his enemies.³ Prayer changed his inner attitude and his outward actions. We see it in his spirituality and in his ethics. We see him practicing a New Testament ethic in the Old Testament: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord (Rom 12:17-19; see Deut 32:35).

The implicit correspondence between 2 Samuel and Psalm 4 shows how prayer and life interface. David’s trust in Yahweh is prayed out in the psalm and worked out in the narrative. His dependence upon Yahweh is evident in the following ways: in his insistence that the ark of the covenant remain in Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:24-29); in his recourse to prayer when he learned of Ahithophel’s betrayal (“Lord, turn Ahithophel’s counsel into foolishness.” 2 Sam 15:31); in his refusal to take action against Shimei (2 Samuel 16:5f); in his ability to find rest (2 Sam 16:14); in his command to his troops to spare Absalom’s life (2 Sam 18:5); in his cruciform grief over Absalom’s murder (2 Sam 18:33); in his appeal for unity (2 Sam 19:11-15); in his forgiveness of Shimei (2 Sam 19:22-23); and in his reconciliation with Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:29-30). Each one of these situations reveals a person who is secure in his God-given identity. The sub-text here is David’s total confidence in Yahweh. He is neither paranoid nor vindictive. As David said to Abishai, who wanted to kill Shimei, “Should anyone be put to death in Israel today? Don’t I know that today I am king over Israel?” (2 Sam 19:22). David was secure in the knowledge that he was the Lord’s anointed. He knew the truth of what would be said to king Jehoshaphat years later, “For the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chron 20:15).

Shame

*How long will people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?
Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him. Psalm 4:2-3*

Psalm 4 is also important in how it combines theology and therapy. David transitions from calling out to God for mercy to calling out his delusional and idolatrous enemies. He pleads with Yahweh, “Give me relief from my distress.” “Distress” implies a spacial metaphor. David is hemmed in, caught in a bind, cornered in a tight spot, and he needs space. He needs room to

³ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 225f: argue that the crisis behind Psalm 4 is a drought and the psalmist is praying for rain. The lack of rain causes the king’s opponents to turn to the pagan fertility cults for help. Ross, *The Psalms*, 232, n.13, comments on C. C. Broyles theory that the psalm is praying for agricultural produces. Ross writes, “While there is some warrant for interpreting the psalm this way, as we shall see in the exposition, the interpretation is not obvious from a careful reading of the psalm and therefore not very convincing.” Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, 113, argues that the Absalom narrative is behind Psalm 4 and “the aristocratic party, whose tool Absalom has become,” describes the opposition.

maneuver. We all know the feeling of having run out of options; the feeling that there is no place to turn. David shows us what to do. He boldly turns to God. His plea is emphatically personal: “Answer *me* when I call to you, *my* righteous God. Give *me* relief from *my* distress; have mercy on *me* and hear *my* prayer.” Then, he pivots and addresses his enemies. Israel’s ruling elite have turned on their king. The faithless rich and powerful have been persuaded by Absalom to wilfully challenge the Lord’s Anointed. They have become drunk on empty words and lies. This realistic appraisal of the opposition combined with his devotion to Yahweh is therapeutic. Even though he is on the run he acquires powerful inner strength. He separates truth from falsehood and devotion from deception. In a swirling flood of lies, he anchors himself in his God-given identity. He knows that Yahweh “has set apart his faithful servant for himself” (Ps 4:3). David’s prayer foreshadows Jesus’ high priestly glory prayer in John 17, when our Savior prayed, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John 17:22-23). As the Lord set apart his faithful servant David, he has set apart the followers of Christ. “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19).

David asked Judah’s elite, the movers and shakers, the rich and powerful who backed Absalom, how long they would turn his glory into shame? The question points forward to Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders of his day who tried to turn his glory into shame. They refused to see the glory of God in the Lord’s Anointed One and they accused him of being demon possessed. Jesus faced the ultimate tension between glory and shame on the cross. In Hebrews we read, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb 12:2-3). “Jesus bore shame to the cross and shamed it.” Rodney Clapp continues, “Shame was crucified, itself disarmed and publicly stripped of its ultimate malignancy (Col 2:15). By enduring the cross, Jesus suffered shame’s worst and yet was vindicated by God. The central, pivotal reality of all existence is now that our worth was secured on the cross. No shame, however just or unjust, however petty or spectacular, can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).”⁴

Followers of Jesus Christ can identify with this tension between glory and shame. First Peter describes believers as chosen outsiders and elect exiles. Like David we are fugitives on the run from the ideological captivity and the false gods of success promoted by our culture. The ruling elite in religion, business, politics, sports, entertainment, and education look down on the followers of Christ.

Consider a believer’s daily experience on a typical university campus.⁵ She starts her day in English class where her professor begins class with a quote from Salman Rushdie: “Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.” He lectures the class on the myth of absolute truth and mocks the notion of divine revelation in the Bible. He equates the Bible with the Book of Mormon and the Qu’ran, and

⁴ Rodney L. Clapp, “Shame Crucified,” *Christianity Today*, March 11, 1991, 26-28, 28.

⁵ Webster, *Outposts of Hope: First Peter’s Christ for Culture Strategy*, 108-109.

argues that the educated mind cannot tolerate dependence on obsolete creeds and truth claims built on thin air.

Her next class is Introduction to Psychology taught by the faculty advisor for the GLBTQ club on campus. Class begins with a discussion on repressive sexual patterns in society and family. The professor makes it clear that she will not even entertain the notion that marriage between man and a woman is normative for society. After class our student heads to her dorm, but to her surprise she finds her roommate in bed with a boyfriend, so she heads for Starbucks. Over a latte she reads for class, Tom Wolfe's latest, *Back to Blood*. If Wolfe is right we are a far more decadent culture than she had ever imagined. He describes a world devoid of friendship and even common decency. His characters are over-sexed adult adolescents. Later in the day she meets up with friends and heads to an evening meeting of an on-campus ministry. The speaker's title was "Breathing Room." It was a nice talk with some good jokes and stories about messy roommates and busy schedules, and the need to clean up the clutter in our lives, but it all left her feeling empty.

On a typical day Christians on a university campus face a constant verbal and mental assault on their faith and ethics. Believers are subject to a constant flood of perspectives that threaten to overwhelm and undermine their faith. Outright deception, accusation, and slander flow in the same cultural current as innocuous speech about sports, fashion, business and pop-culture. The propaganda stream against the people of God can be both intense and pervasive. Psalm 4 re-orientes the follower of Jesus in the wake of these pressures and focuses attention on the Lord who has set her apart for his glory.

In the wake of Absalom's ascendancy it would have been easy for David and his loyal followers to feel washed up and ashamed. But David's identity as the Lord's Anointed One remained certain. The world can attempt to turn Christ's glory into shame but it will not succeed.

David's model of resilience corresponds well to Peter's message to the "elect exiles." He calls believers to embrace with joy the new reality chosen for them by the triune God. He reminds them that they have been given new birth into a "living hope," into "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." Christ's followers live into a new reality that far outweighs the social reality of being resident aliens. They eagerly await "the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." Instead of suffering deep resentment because of their ideological alienation, Christ's "chosen outsiders" are "filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet 1:3-8).

Sleep

Tremble and do not sin;

when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.

Many, Lord are asking, 'Who will bring us prosperity?'

Let the light of your face shine on us.

Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.

*In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.*
Psalm 4:4-8

After confronting his adversaries, David offered timely spiritual direction to his loyal friends.⁶ Psalm 4 reflects the leadership challenge David faced externally and internally. Absalom and his fellow conspirators, whom he described as delusional idolaters, were out to kill David. But the king also needed to challenge and comfort his loyal subjects, some of whom were angry, while many others were filled with fear and doubt. David had to deal with Absalom's life-threatening opposition without and he had to persuade hot-heads and defeatists within to remain faithful. He counseled his followers to control their anger and to check their righteous indignation. "Complain if you must, but don't lash out. Keep your mouth shut, and let your heart do the talking. Build your case before God and wait for his verdict" (4:4-5 msg). The apostle Paul used this same line to instruct the believers at Ephesus. He wrote, "In your anger do not sin" (Ps 4:4, LXX): Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26-27).

Anger is a dangerous emotion, because it makes us more susceptible to sin. Not all anger is bad, but nothing good comes from an anger that is allowed to metastasize. Abishai would have surely killed Shimei if David had not intervened (2 Sam 16:9-10). Anger quickly becomes a carcinogen that robs the soul of its life and vitality and replaces it with bitterness and malice. One of the tell-tale marks of righteous anger is its quick dissipation of emotion, leaving only the enduring and persevering commitment to righteousness. Our anger becomes suspect when we allow it to fester and grow into bitterness. Even righteous anger can quickly grow into an evil anger that is nursed and cherished as one's dearest possession. Why give the devil an easy advantage? Why allow the devil a foothold to climb all over you? Angry believers are easy game for the devil who "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

David's counsel is consistent with his own example of willed passivity: "When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent." Instead of nursing fear and resentment, David challenged the people to give themselves to God in heartfelt worship and trust.

What does David say to the many who are fearful, doubtful, and doleful? They keep asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Their king is on the run and they feel threatened. Who is going to look out for them? David refused to promise what political leaders and power-brokers invariably promise. He did not say, "Believe in me. Trust me." He did not attempt to trump Absalom's promises (2 Sam 15:4). David did what any good prophet/priest/king would do. He pronounced the benediction. He focused on Yahweh and echoed Aaron's blessing, "The Lord

⁶ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 234-5, see v. 4 directed to "the apostate highborn" who should tremble in fear before their impending doom. Ross, *The Psalms*, 236, argues that "David was calling for his enemies to be shaken to the core so that they would stop sinning." Peter Craigie, *The Psalms*, 81, agrees that the psalmist is still addressing the "sons of man" (v. 3) and offers this paraphrase, "You can tremble with anger and rage, but don't sin by doing anything! You can speak your evil words within your hearts, but don't speak them out loud! Lie still and silent on your beds, where you can do no harm." Craigie suggests that this advice might also apply to the psalmist himself. Another possibility that I believe fits the situation better and corresponds to the apostle Paul's use of this text in Ephesians 4:26 sees David giving direction to his loyal followers in how to remain faithful in the crisis.

bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:24-26). David revels in a joy that rivals the joy of the harvest. Inner joy transcends material abundance. “You have put joy in my heart, more than when their grain and their wine abound.”⁷

Psalm 4 is an evening prayer in a crisis. The psalmist’s prayer for space to maneuver out of a tight place has been answered. Circumstances have not changed but David’s cry has been heard and his heart has been changed. In the presence of Yahweh David has been empowered to confront his foes and challenge his friends. At the end of the day his world is clearly God-centered: “Let the light of your face shine on us” (Ps 4:6). He began the day feeling trapped and insecure. He ends the day in shalom, because Yahweh is his righteousness, exaltation, joy, and peace.⁸ The psalmist’s testimony is clear, “For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.” This makes it possible for those who put their trust in Yahweh to lie down and fall asleep at once. Delitzsch writes, “In the last line the evening hymn itself sinks into rest. The iambics with which it closes are like the last strains of a lullaby which die away, softly and as though falling asleep themselves.”⁹

⁷ Ross, *The Psalms*, 239.

⁸ Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, 118.

⁹ Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, 118.